



SR1042

LRB098 20711 GRL 57574 r

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SENATE RESOLUTION

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WHEREAS, The members of the Illinois Senate are saddened to learn of the death of Vernita Gray on March 19, 2014; and

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WHEREAS, Vernita Gray, a native Chicagoan who attended St. Mary High School and Columbia College, came out as a lesbian in 1969 and spent the rest of her life advocating for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, mentoring gay and questioning youth, opposing violence in all its forms, and working tirelessly for a more just Illinois; and

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WHEREAS, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Chicago when Vernita Gray was a young girl and inspired her to a lifetime of activism through his campaign to end de facto segregation in Chicago neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools; and

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WHEREAS, Vernita Gray's career was varied, including ownership of the Uptown restaurant Sol Sands and 18 years at the Cook County State's Attorney's Office, where she assisted LGBT victims of crime and coordinated the office's outreach to the LGBT community; and

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WHEREAS, In the early 1970s, Vernita Gray started the first LGBT helpline out of her one-bedroom apartment; over the years,

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1 she sheltered many teenagers forced to leave their homes  
2 because of their sexual orientation; and

3 WHEREAS, Vernita Gray, who described herself as a "gay  
4 hippie", traveled the world; she was a friend of many social  
5 justice pioneers, including James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks,  
6 and Barack Obama, and visited the White House 4 times during  
7 the Obama administration, yet remained committed to the  
8 struggle for equality and understanding in her hometown of  
9 Chicago; and

10 WHEREAS, Vernita Gray was a gifted poet who knew how to  
11 rally a crowd with the spoken word; and

12 WHEREAS, Vernita Gray received dozens of awards for her  
13 work, including the Stonewall Award and the Horizons Community  
14 Services Human First Award; she was also inducted into the  
15 Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame; and

16 WHEREAS, Vernita Gray met her wife, Pat Ewert, in 2009; she  
17 subsequently entered into a civil union with her soon after  
18 Illinois law created that option for same-sex couples in 2011;  
19 and

20 WHEREAS, When Vernita Gray was diagnosed with terminal  
21 cancer, she and Pat Ewert knew they wanted to be married under

1 the laws of the State of Illinois, thereby publicly declaring  
2 their love for one another, enjoying the fruits of a long labor  
3 for one of the major goals of the LGBT justice movement, and  
4 assuming the rights and responsibilities of marriage in the  
5 eyes of family, friends, and the State; and

6 WHEREAS, On the basis of her doctor's opinion that her time  
7 on this earth was coming to an end, Vernita Gray, along with  
8 Pat Ewert, successfully filed suit for the right to marry  
9 before the June 1 effective date of the Illinois Religious  
10 Freedom and Marriage Equality Act; in doing so, she opened the  
11 door for other similarly situated same-sex couples to obtain  
12 marriage licenses in Illinois; and

13 WHEREAS, In the midst of her personal battle with cancer,  
14 Vernita Gray served as a trailblazer and an inspiration, dying  
15 as she lived - as a creative, committed and compassionate voice  
16 for a more just society; therefore, be it

17 RESOLVED, BY THE SENATE OF THE NINETY-EIGHTH GENERAL  
18 ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, that we, along with her  
19 wife, family, and friends, mourn the passing of Vernita Gray;  
20 and be it further

21 RESOLVED, That a suitable copy of this resolution be  
22 presented to the family of Vernita Gray as an expression of our

SR1042

-4-

LRB098 20711 GRL 57574 r

1 sympathy.